

## Repeat Until Death by TheLostSister

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Jopper reunion, Post Season 3, russian prison break

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Murray Bauman

**Relationships:** Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2021-07-03

**Updated:** 2021-07-03

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 12:47:43

**Rating:** Not Rated

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 7,035

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

The fleeting bit of time where everything is just as it should be before Hopper and Joyce return home to California.

# Repeat Until Death

## Author's Note:

Happy (almost) two year season 3 anniversary!!  
Anyway, the picture David Harbour posted on Instagram got me thinking and I wrote this.

*Rinnng. Rinnng. Rinnng. Rinnng.*

*Hello, you've reached the Byers. We're not home right now, but please leave a message and we'll get back to you.*

"Hey guys, just checking in..." Joyce glances at the clock; it's nearly 11 PM. "Sorry to call so late. Everything's going fine, and um, just wanted to let you know I'll be home tomorrow night." She stalls, waiting for one of the kids to hear the message and pick up, but no one does. "Okay, well, I love you guys. See you tomorrow."

She hangs up the phone and lays down on top of the hotel duvet letting out a tired sigh. The pillow under her head feels so soft that if she didn't have that nagging bit of anxiety over not getting to talk to the kids, she may have passed out right there.

She hugged the kids all so tight before she left nearly a week ago for the 'work conference.' That day seems like so long ago but also like it was just yesterday all at the same time. She tried not to make it obvious, *she was just worried about leaving them alone for the week*. But really, it was sort of a last goodbye, just in case.

Despite her worst fears, things had gone surprisingly nearly according to plan.

The plane ride to Alaska. The terrifying cash exchange with a shady Russian smuggler, whose accent was so thick that even when he was speaking in his broken English, Joyce had a hard time understanding him. The even smaller plane ride across the Northern Pacific. The train. And then the waiting...the agonizing waiting to see if they'd stupidly walked into what easily could have been a set up. The helicopter that was so loud Joyce could barely hear herself thinking.

The freezing cold.

### **And then, the relief.**

The instant, immense relief when her eyes met his.

The slow shake of Hopper's head, like he was sure that he was dreaming.

In that moment, there hadn't been much time for a reunion, but still, Joyce walked- or maybe she ran- she honestly couldn't remember, straight into his arms. She would never forget the way it felt when his tentative arms wrapped around her shaking shoulders, or the way his voice broke when he whispered her name so softly in her ear that she was the only one to hear it.

Everything after that was all a blur.

Now on their final leg of the journey, there was just one night in a hotel, one more plane ride from Seattle to LA, and a couple hour drive, and Hopper would be home.

It still didn't even sound real.

Joyce had never fully allowed herself to get too far into the details about what life was going to look like from here on out, and it was almost too overwhelming to consider now. She loved El like her own, but she had considered the fact that Hop may not want to stay in California. Of course if he didn't, it would be devastating. She also knew that she would have no choice but to let the two of them go.

Joyce runs her hands across her forehead to ease some of her tension. She's getting a little ahead of herself, always thinking about the worst that could happen. She wishes she weren't that way, but when your whole life is barely one tiny breath in between crushing heartbreaks, it's hard not to let that consume you. Even when things were *good*.

And although they were all so tired and she hadn't been able to talk to the kids tonight, things still felt very good right now; this nightmare is actually over.

Over the past day and a half of their non-stop travels, Joyce had been

able to catch Hopper up on the important things, *El is okay, they live in California now, yes, everyone still thinks you're dead...* but aside from that, the two haven't had any time for a real, private conversation.

Despite Hopper endlessly thinking about how he would apologize to Joyce for absolutely everything if he ever saw her again, he still hadn't, and that was slowly eating away at him. While Joyce had caught him up on a lot of things, there was still so much that he needed to tell her.

As his days in captivity turned into weeks, and weeks into months, he knew the clock only ticked faster and faster until the end of his life. Hell, it didn't really matter. Without El and Joyce, his life was already over anyway. At least when Joyce looked him in his eyes for the last time that night back in July, he knew without a doubt that El was going to be taken care of. Though he hadn't uttered any words out loud, he also desperately hoped Joyce had understood what he had tried so hard to tell her in those last few moments together:

*It's okay. I love you.*

Honestly, his love for them is the only reason why he's still alive, why he fought through the hopelessness, through the overwhelming desire to willingly engage in a brawl with a guard and let that be the end of it all.

But because he still had so much he needed to tell his two girls, he made a silent vow to himself to stay alive as long as he could. The days continued to pass slowly, and while no longer suicidal, he certainly wasn't alive.

If he did get his family back someday, he wouldn't, *couldn't*, screw things up again, and Hopper almost felt like a different man than the one who disappeared that summer night. He really needed to quickly learn how to navigate what that meant, because the stress of not wanting to mess anything up had already left him somewhat struggling.

Finding out that El had lost use of her powers and that Joyce moved all the way to California wasn't the most surprising part of everything he's learned so far. He had sort of expected her to move away. As

much as the thought ached, Hopper had silently and selflessly prayed every single day that they could move on, move on from him, from Hawkins, from everything.

But what *had* surprised him, was when Joyce pulled out a small stack of his clothes from her luggage and set them on the end of the hotel bed for him.

*She'd kept his clothes.*

She kept his clothes through a move across the entire country when they weren't certain whether or not he was even alive. Why would she do that?

The implication of what that could have meant was almost too heavy, and he stuttered his way through a soft thanks before taking them into the bathroom to shower.

Hopper stood in the shower long enough that he'd lost track of time, but the hot water had felt glorious; add that to the list of things he won't take for granted again.

He reaches for the tap and turns it off, stepping out of the tub and into the bathroom that's filled with a thick, humid steam. Hopper grabs one of the white, overly washed towels and dries himself off. Although it's just an old hotel towel, it's still one of the softest things to touch him in nine months...aside from the way Joyce's hair felt when he hugged her for the first time again; he'd had such a hard time letting her go.

He finishes toweling off and eyes the discarded blue prison uniform that sits on the floor in a disgusting, dirty heap. His eyes drift between that and the pile of clean clothes on the counter, and his throat immediately tightens. After a breath, he slowly sifts through the options. There are jeans, a button up flannel, a t-shirt, a long sleeved Henley, sweatpants...and clean socks and underwear.

*Jesus*, his first thought is that Joyce is too considerate.

And then comes his second thought- the appalling realization that she had to go through his underwear drawer, which leaves him groaning

in shame. His years as a bachelor surely left a few things to be desired in that department.

He tries to shake that out of his mind and draws another deep breath before he unfolds a pair of underwear and slips them on. They're a bit loose, but thankfully, they manage to stay put alright. When he steps into the sweatpants, he has to pull the drawstrings tight and tie them to keep them on his hips. Had he really lost *that* much weight?

Hopper scrubs away a patch of condensation on the mirror and looks at himself properly for the first time in a decent light in many months. There are a few bruises and a healing cut over his eyebrow that would most likely leave a scar, but he's honestly a little surprised to find that he looks better than he had expected.

Maybe it's simply the fact that he's actually clean now.

Feeling a little too warm and sticky in the bathroom, he opts to put on just a t-shirt. It also used to be a bit tight on him, though now it's a few sizes too large just like his pants. Hopper picks up the dirty blue jacket and pants that he's worn for months and bunches them up. Something small falls out from his pants pockets and skids around when it hits the tile floor. Hopper stares down at it for a moment. It's just a small lighter, certainly nothing significant, and he's got plenty of his own. If he even decides to take up smoking again.

But still, he'd *earned* that little thing.

He bends down to pick it up and tucks it into the rest of the clean clothing with a smirk before shoving his dirty, old clothes into the small bathroom trash can.

Good riddance.

When he exits the bathroom, Joyce sits up from where she's laying on one of the two beds. She gives him a quick once over, and he suddenly feels a little self-conscious for absolutely no reason.

"Thanks again for the clothes. It feels great to get out of those things," he says, setting the rest of his belongings on top of the small desk in the corner of the hotel room.

“Oh yeah, no problem,” she replies.

Even in pajamas, he finds himself struck by how pretty she is, even more beautiful than he remembered in his head, and he has to turn his attention away for a second. There have been a few occasions where this all feels like too much. Like he knows all he has to do is breathe wrong, and he’s going to wake up back in the cold, dark cell all alone with nothing but an even bigger hole in his chest.

“Murray go to bed?” Hops questions, realizing it’s too quiet.

“No, he went out to pick up something to eat. Apparently delivery ended at 11.”

Hopper glances at the clock, not realizing it’s that late. Over these past few days, time seemed inconsequential, and given the fact that he’s had the opportunity to eat more over the past 24 hours than he normally did in one week, dinner hadn’t even been on his mind.

“You talk to the kids?” Hop asks.

Joyce shakes her head no. She’s clearly trying to hide it, but her worry is palpable.

Hopper sits down on the side of the bed next to her; he hates to see her worry.

“Oh, well they’re probably just asleep already,” he reassures her confidently.

Joyce lets out a small laugh that he’s picked up on her anxiety that easily. It’s strange being back with him, almost like nothing’s changed, even though *everything’s* changed.

“I’m that obvious?” she asks him anyway.

“No, you’re just a good mom,” Hopper explains softly.

She’s not sure how true that is. In fact, when she left nearly a week ago, that was the exact opposite of how she felt. She’d even spent the better part of the 5.5 hour flight to Alaska berating herself over it, and how she could have, *should have*, at least told Jonathan the truth

about where she would be going, especially if something happened to her and Murray. Then he would have at least known what to tell the other two kids. But that felt like leaving him with a huge, unnecessary burden, so she ultimately decided against it. As if the torment of possibly *never* knowing where your mom disappeared to and being left alone to take care of two kids would have somehow been any better.

"I just hope El's not upset that I didn't tell her sooner. I mean, I know she'll be so happy, but..."

"You don't have to explain," Hopper interrupts, shaking his head.

"I was just nervous that something might happen," Joyce adds anyway. "And I...I could never put her through anything like that again."

"Something did happen," Hopper gestures.

Joyce pulls her eyebrows together in silent question, and Hop reaches for her right hand. His fingers trail gently over the swollen, bruised skin of her hand, this time silently questioning her.

"Oh," she laughs lightly and stares down at her hand.

She hasn't mentioned how those bruises came to be, and when she doesn't offer an explanation, Hopper's pretty sure he won't ever find out unless he can coax it out of Murray someday.

"You need to get that looked at when we get back," he tells her softly anyway.

She shakes her head in disbelief.

"What? You do," he repeats sternly. "It really looks like it could be broken."

"No, it's not that. It's just...*you're* worrying about *me*?" She sighs, trying hard to hide the threat of tears in her voice.

"Yeah. I mean, not that I didn't want to see you," Hopper prefaces quietly. "But I really wish you had not gotten involved in... *any* of



that.”

One quick look at Joyce tells him that she’s going to argue, so he goes on before she has the chance.

“Listen, if something had happened to you in the process-“ He pauses again, feeling a bit like it was now or never. Up until this point, they hadn’t really had a true, quiet moment alone with each other, and Hopper suddenly feels like he needs to tell her exactly how he feels before it’s too late.

*Again.*

“Joyce... “ He sighs and then starts again. “It’s just that I’ve spent endless nights thinking about what I would say to you if I ever had another chance. And even after all that time, I still don’t have the right words.”

Joyce can feel her heart in her throat, and she forces herself to take a slow, discreet breath. She wants him to go on, and yet she sort of doesn’t all at the same time. Maybe it’s because he seems a little nervous too.

Is he just trying to let her down gently?

Hopper doesn’t see the range of concern run through her face because his eyes are still trained on her injured hand that he holds in his, his thumb barely ghosting over her bruised skin for fear of causing her more pain.

“But what I do know is that I really-“

A harsh knock on their door interrupts him. It startles Joyce so much that she lets out a little yelp in surprise. Hopper immediately jumps up in front of her, and he’s looking around the room almost wildly as if searching for a weapon or anything he could use to protect her. Sure, the abrupt noise was startling, but his level of alarm is *different*, and it makes Joyce’s heart ache.

“Hey, I’m sure it’s just-“ Joyce begins to promise before Murray’s voice interrupts.

"A little help please," he calls with another knock from the hallway.

Hopper is at the door looking through the peephole to ensure that Murray is alone before Joyce can even make it over there. Though they had successfully distanced themselves from all of the danger, it's obviously going to take some time for Hop to come down from the heightened sense of fight or flight he's had to maintain just to stay alive.

He opens the door and steps back for Murray to come inside.

"It's raining," Murray complains, gesturing to his wet clothes.

He steps inside and sets down a pizza box and a six pack Coke on the closest bed.

"And I hope you like pepperoni. I know Seattle's not really known for its pizza but there's pretty limited options at this hour," he goes on, not really looking at the two of them long enough to notice that he's interrupted something.

Hopper closes and locks the hotel room door, trying to get a handle on his rapid heartrate. Joyce is standing next to him and reaches out to give his arm a soft squeeze.

*It's okay.*

He lets out a sigh that he doesn't intend for her to hear, though the second her concerned eyes flash to his, he knows that she did.

The last thing he wants to do is give Joyce anything more to worry about. He shoots her a subtle nod, a silent confirmation that *yeah, it's okay*, and forces his shoulders to relax.

"And looks like there's no plates," Murray's still ranting.

"Eh, it's all still a step up from what I've been used to," Hopper attempts to joke, though it only makes Joyce's stomach drop.

"Right...I suppose that's true," Murray agrees. "Hey, you look a little better now," he adds when he finally pauses long enough to actually look at Hopper.

"Oh, um yeah. Feel better too. But uh, you don't happen to have a belt I could borrow?"

Murray looks a little confused, so Hop goes on.

"I kind of don't think those jeans are going to stay up too well tomorrow without a little help. I'd really hate to subject the other airport passengers to any sort of you know, wardrobe malfunction, or anything like that."

Murray nods.

"I've got one you can use. We certainly don't need you getting pegged for the no-fly list, at least not yet." He laughs, and Hopper agrees with a laugh too.

It's easy when Murray's here with them. He's not one to beat around the bush, and he doesn't shy away from awkward conversation, as long as it's honest.

But just as quickly as he arrived, they've all finished eating, and he's off to his own room for the night. It wasn't exactly discussed but instead just kind of understood that Joyce and Hopper would stay in the same room; Murray hadn't really given them any other option. He knew that they both still had a lot to talk about, and he wasn't about to give them another excuse to hide from each other on their one and only real night together before being thrown back into the real world again.

Maybe it was pointless.

They're all so tired from the past couple of days that maybe all they'll do is get a good night's sleep, but hey, at least he tried.

Joyce follows Murray to the door and engages the chain lock after he's gone. She returns to one of the beds and sits down on it next to Hopper. The sheer and utter exhaustion really hits her, and she feels like she might collapse; Hopper certainly couldn't be feeling any better.

"So you're a lefty now?" he asks, breaking the silence.

“Hm?” Joyce asks, and Hop nods to her hand again.

He watched her awkwardly eat with her left hand and struggle to crack open a can of Coke, catching her subtle wince every time she would forget and attempt to use her injured hand.

“Oh.”

*That.*

“Really, it’s fine,” Joyce promises again, even though Hopper *was* right; every movement caused a sharp pain that ran from her fingers to her wrist, sometimes so blindingly painful that she almost felt physically sick from it. “It’s just easier not to use it,” she sighs honestly.

Hopper nods.

“I just hate that you got hurt because of me,” he tells her again in a low voice.

“It’s just a bruise,” she dismisses just as quietly.

“Maybe, but it easily could have been a lot worse.”

He’s right. It could have.

“Hop,” Joyce tells him with the shake of her head. “After everything you’ve gone through, this is literally nothing you need to worry about.”

Hopper just shrugs and averts his eyes, his gaze drifting down to focus on the tan duvet of the bed. Joyce recognizes that behavior all too well. It’s strangely similar to how El responds when she doesn’t want to talk about something.

“I’m not saying I enjoyed it, but it wasn’t that...” He stops short. No, it *was* that bad, but he didn’t need for Joyce to know any of that, so he rephrases. “I learned how to play the game. Keep your head down, stay quiet, do your work,” he shrugs.

Joyce feels a burning lump in her throat. Hop’s listened a lot over the

last day and a half while she filled him in about the past 9 months, but he had yet to talk about what any of that time was like for him.

“Once I figured out the hierarchy, it wasn’t too hard to stay out of trouble most times.”

It’s true; he knew how to stay invisible, and he also knew how to cause a scene, if he really needed to. That was how he got acquired the lighter that he’s now stashed away in his pile of clothes. That little thing earned him a few battle scars, but the tradeoff was worth it. Not because he thought he might get lucky and bum a cigarette off a guard, but for the sliver of protection it could provide...if he ever found himself needing it.

And now it will serve its new purpose of being a physical token of where he’s been and small reminder of the man he never wants to be again.

He quickly glances over at Joyce and though she’s doing her best to hide it, the look on her face makes him abandon any further prison talk. She doesn’t need to hear any of this right now... or ever. It was over.

“But you know, if I’m being honest, I think back on some days back when it was just me and El back at the cabin, you know, before anyone knew about her. Man, some of those days when I was feeling like... like just a fucking *failure* as a human being every day... some of those days were harder. I mean, Russian prison has *really* got nothing on an emotional, telekinetic thirteen year old kid,” he jokes with a laugh, hoping to soften the furrow in Joyce’s brow.

Joyce quickly gathers that he’s just deflecting, and it crosses her mind that he might be doing that for her benefit, or maybe because he’s truly not ready to talk to her about it just yet. She just hopes that he knows that he can tell her anytime he feels ready to, no matter how hard it would be for her to hear.

They’re both quiet for a moment. Joyce tries her best to steady her voice when she speaks, but she can’t manage any sound louder than a whisper when she finally asks, “Are you okay?”

Hopper immediately nods, hoping she can see that he means it.

But the tears that line her eyes tell him it's not enough.

"I am, Joyce," he reassures her with a brief pause. "I mean, I am *now*."

*Shit...Just fucking tell her...*

"It's just that I, uh, I kind of feel like a different person now if that makes any sense. I feel like...like I don't know how to do this...how to be around you," he stammers through it the best he can manage.

"Hop," Joyce's voice breaks with a wave of sudden nausea and immense misunderstanding.

This is exactly what she'd tried to prepare herself for, wasn't it?

He needs space, he needs time away from her, away from all of this. This should not be a surprise.

Joyce forces a shaky breath and continues.

"It doesn't have to be different. I mean, I know everything is, but I don't want to put any sort of pressure on you to be a certain way or like you have to make decisions about *anything*. I mean, I'm so exhausted right now, so I can't imagine how you must feel, and you can take as much time as you need..."

She realizes she's rambling, so she tries to get to the point before a complete breakdown.

"What I'm trying to say is, you don't have to make any decisions tonight. But I do understand if you...if you feel like you need to just take El and...go."

It hurts so badly to say it out loud, but she needs for him to know that he has an out, that he doesn't have to stay with her if he needs to just get away from it all; she could never blame him for feeling that way.

"Well, that's kind of the thing, Joyce." He's quiet for a moment and

so is she. "I've wasted enough time just... being a total idiot," he lets out a breath with a shake of his head and a half smile, not a happy one. "Anyway, I know what I want, what I'll *always* want, and more time won't change any of that. I want to be wherever my family is."

"I just didn't...I don't want you to think that I expect you to...you have so much to think about and..." Words completely fail her, and so she just stops trying.

"I've already wasted so much time... just so much time... being jealous and angry and bitter and *alone*. Do you remember that night we were driving back from Illinois?" Hopper asks.

Joyce doesn't reply, but after a quick glance at her, he can tell that she knows what he's talking about, so he goes on.

"Well, Murray wasn't wrong about me. I did all of that under the pretense that it would keep me from getting hurt again, and damned if it didn't do just the opposite." He pauses and lets the silence hang in the air for a moment before going on. "But um, I've also considered the fact that you might want to move on from all of this, from *me*. And you and your family deserve to move on. So um, if that's not with me, I get it, okay?"

He truly believes this is what Joyce was trying to tell him earlier by giving *him* a way out, that it was just her gentle way of saying she's glad he's okay, but that she can't manage to be anything more than friends.

"I know your nature, Joyce. I know how you shoulder the blame for all of the things that are not your fault, things totally out of your control. And I would never want you to feel guilty or like you have to be responsible for me, or El, or anything, so you don't have to...God, I don't know. Just..." He lets out a heavy sigh. "I don't want you to feel like your obligated to look after me now, you know?"

Hopper finally looks at her properly and silent tears are dripping down her cheeks. He wonders if they're tears of relief.

He just wants her to be happy no matter what it costs him, even if it really fucking hurts. And as desperately as he had wanted to

apologize to her for everything, he sort of wishes now that he'd put off *this part* of the conversation, at least for a few more days.

"Joyce," his voice breaks when he says her name. It's a lot like when he saw her for the first time a day and a half ago, except now it sounds like her name burned his tongue on the way out.

He reaches towards her cheek, his thumb brushing away her tears before abruptly pulling back; this isn't making it any easier on him.

"It's just that as much as I want to be with you, I need you to know, that it's..." his head swims, looking for the appropriate word, but there isn't one. "It's... okay if *I'm* not what you want. I just want you to be happy." Even though it's the truth, he can't hide the pain in his voice.

*As much as I want to be with you?* Though Joyce wants to scream at him, *how could you think I don't want that too?!* Her voice comes out barely above a whisper. "Hop, you know what I would give to move on from all of this."

Hopper's jaw tightens and his heart drops, bracing himself again for what's about to come next.

"But Jesus, Jim... *not without you.*"

His face must accurately portray his blank incomprehension because Joyce's uninjured hand lands on his, and she squeezes it so tightly that it forces him to make eye contact with her.

"Not without you," she repeats.

After everything they've gone through, it seems like this would be the easy part compared to any of that, that they would both be so strong and unshakable after trips to another dimension and a dangerous Russian prison break. But instead, the raw emotions and physical exhaustion of the last few days, hell, years even, compounded with the fact that they've both barely managed a few uncomfortable hours of sleep in between less than stellar modes of transportation, they are both left feeling especially fragile.

All it takes is one look in Hopper's eyes and Joyce completely



shatters. He's instantly there to wrap her up in his arms. Hearing her sob and the way she melts into him brings him one step closer to the edge of losing too.

He buries his hand in her hair and drops his head to the top of hers, trying to protectively fold himself around her. He forgot how absolutely tiny she is until this moment.

And what were they both saying...were they actually on the same page for once?

Joyce cries until her head is throbbing, and even between the pain in her head and her hand, she can't remember the last time she felt this okay, this vulnerable and *safe* with another person.

It's been so long.

Hopper holds her until all the tension in her shoulders is gone and there's only an occasional snuffle coming from her.

"I'm really sorry," she apologizes with a shaky breath, though she doesn't move to get up. "This all just-

"Doesn't feel real?" he finishes.

"Yeah," she says softly with a nod. She wipes her cheeks and releases another deep breath; it feels so cathartic.

"So," Hop says softly. "What you were saying is, you won't mind if I stick around?"

She nods and lets out a breath of a laugh.

"Please."

"No, you're supposed to say, *stop talking before I change my mind*," he teases quietly, as if it was just yesterday that they were having a similar and yet so different, conversation.

This time she laughs, a real Joyce Byers laugh, the one that makes her nose crinkle.

God, he's missed that.

"Hop, I don't think I could change my mind anymore."

And very suddenly, this all went from something that felt so complicated to something that was never so simple.

"So then this..." He pauses and Joyce looks up at him.

With slow deliberation, he brings his lips to meet hers. They're soft and warm and a hint salty from her lingering tears. He kisses her gently once... twice...and for a brief moment, Joyce forgets everything.

All her worries. All her guilt.

Her mind is finally quiet.

Hopper pulls back a few inches and murmurs, "...this would be okay?"

Joyce doesn't answer, but instead, hooks her arm around his neck and kisses him again, not gentle or careful like their first two kisses. Instead, her fingertips curl into the back of his neck, not hard enough to be painful but with an intense need to just somehow get closer. She feels the upward curve of his lips, and he lets out a satisfied little moan, a sound that's more felt than heard. Her heart is racing, and apparently, she forgets how to breathe, because soon the pounding in her head changes to spinning, and she starts to see black stars.

With a soft, disappointed sigh, Joyce pulls back, her breathing jagged and disjointed.

Hopper brushes a strand of hair gently behind her ear and patiently waits. Frankly, he needs a minute too. This is...a lot.

Though she doesn't want to move, she feels so tired that her head almost seems disconnected from her body now. Eventually Joyce lets out an involuntary yawn and drops her head to his shoulder.

"We should get some sleep," Hopper finally whispers, his voice so intimately soft that it makes her feel nervous, like when she was a

teenager all over again.

Joyce nods and reluctantly finds the will to stand up.

Hop pulls back the covers on one of the beds and gestures for Joyce to climb in. She moves over to one side and he hesitates a moment before deciding to get into bed with her. Joyce lets out a soft breath, not realizing his hesitation was making her anxious.

Hopper reaches over to the bedside table for switch on the lamp, and the room is thrust into darkness. He shifts in bed and lays down on his back, his arm pressing up against hers. The second he touches her, she rolls over onto her side to get closer to him. Hopper feels a rush of confidence, a sort of need that he's utterly defenseless against, and he instinctively wraps his arm around, pulling her to his chest.

Joyce instantly relaxes in his arms, and just like when he first kissed her earlier, all of her sadness, all of her anxiety, the weight she's been carrying around...it's gone.

For another unimaginable moment, everything is okay.

When was the last time she could say that?

Hopper sighs in content and tightens his arm around her. Thirty seconds ago, he'd felt a little nervous climbing into bed with her, unsure if this was overstepping a boundary.

But he's waited so long for this moment, and now it feels familiar, like something he's missed; it feels like he's *home*.

He wonders how that's possible, how could you desperately miss something when it had never even actually been yours to begin with?

As if he's said that thought out loud, Joyce murmurs, "God, I missed you."

"I missed you too. So much," Hopper whispers too. "So much," he repeats with a hard swallow.

He kisses the top of her head and Joyce lets out a soft sigh, snuggling closer to him. The comfortable silence lengthens, and though they

both try their best to to fight it not wanting this to night to end, sleep is soon tugging at them both.

“Hop?” Joyce murmurs wondering if he’s even still awake.

“Hm?” he manages to answer.

“That night in the car?” she says as if it’s a question. Her hand has now found its way under the hem of his shirt and rests on his bare stomach. She lets out a sleepy sigh and pauses so long that Hop thinks she fell asleep mid-sentence. But finally, she whispers, “Well, Murray wasn’t wrong about me either.”

Hopper smirks, remembering nearly every word of that conversation, and bends down to kiss her forehead once more.

“O-okay,” he smiles. Joyce’s eyes flutter closed. “Good to know.”

Hopper eventually wakes up sometime in the very early morning, and Joyce is right where he remembers her. Her breathing is slow and even, and he can’t believe that this isn’t a dream. He tightens his arms protectively around her again and drifts off back to sleep again.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Joyce lets out a sleepy breath and stretches her legs out, before draping one back over Hop. She closes her eyes again, not realizing that something had actually woken her up. She’s too warm and sleepy and content, and definitely not ready to be awake, but the peace lasts only for a few more seconds.

*Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.*

This time, the human pillow beneath her shifts, and she whines in defeat at the unwelcome interruption to their sleep.

“Mmm, I got it,” she tells Hopper, putting a hand on his chest indicating that he is to stay put.

Joyce climbs out of bed, confirms who it is, and opens the door.

“Oh,” Murray says, looking her up and down. Her cheeks are pink

and she's in her pajamas; it's no surprise to see that she wasn't expecting him. "Hope I wasn't interrupting anything," he smirks.

Joyce runs a hand through her hair and sighs.

*Why is he here standing at her door so early?*

"You kind of were. We were sleeping," Joyce tells him. "Why are you up so early?"

"Early?"

"Yeah, what time is it?"

Murray steps in and Joyce follows him. When the door closes, the room is dark, but Joyce can see now that there's a sliver of light peeking in around the edges of the heavy curtains. She reaches for the lamp and notices that the clock says 11:49.

"Oh," she says in surprise.

It takes but a quick second once the lights flick on to see that one of the beds has not been slept in.

"Hi, Jim," Murray nods with a little smile towards Hop, who has yet to even sit up in bed.

Hopper gives a little nod back and lets out a sigh.

"Well anyway, I brought you this," Murray says holding up a belt before setting it down next to Hopper's stack of clothes on the desk. "And uh, we need to leave for the airport in another hour, so..."

"Right, thanks," Hopper nods, and then the room is silent, mostly because two of the three people are still half asleep.

"Alriiiight," Murray says, looking between the two of them. "I guess I'll meet you down in the hotel lobby in another hour?"

"Yeah, sounds great," Joyce agrees with a tired sigh. She hears the door click shut, and then she's climbing back in bed with Hopper.

Sometimes things can feel a certain way at night when you're overly tired and your emotions are spent, but right now, everything feels just the same as it did the night before. Like it's exactly where they are both meant to be, and nothing can change that now.

Even though they have to leave soon, neither of them make a move to get back up for a few more minutes. They've slept together for nearly 12 hours, and it still didn't feel like it was long enough.

Hopper eventually kisses the top of Joyce's head and lets out a sigh, the kind that indicates his intention to really get up and start their day this time.

Joyce lifts her head from his chest and smiles up at him.

"You get to see El today," she says, as if she's just remembered that there are other people in this world who have missed him just as much as she has.

"I get to see El today," Hopper repeats with a smile of his own, because it doesn't even sound real.

Joyce considers calling home, but there's really no good reason to. They kids should have gotten her message from the night before already, so she lets go of that worry and tries to focus on just *being happy*.

And just like that, the day goes by quickly and finally, they are just minutes away from home.

Their *home*, the one that Hopper hasn't even seen yet.

As their car exits the highway and creeps farther away from the big city, Hopper feels himself growing more and more anxious at every stop sign and turn.

"There's the kids' school," Joyce points out as they drive past the massive high school, one that could probably fit six Hawkins Highs inside.

And not too many minutes later, their car slows at a house on the corner and pulls into a semi-circular driveway. They are parked in

front of a partially brick and tan colored, split-level house.

*This is it?*

It's literally perfect, perfect for a family of five. Hopper's heart is pounding in his chest now, and he absently wonders if one of the two windows in the front of the upstairs are El's.

Joyce flashes him a soft smile, already having to hold back happy tears of her own again. She knows she's going to have to make this brief.

They planned for him to stay outside, and Joyce would first tell the kids that she brought home a surprise, and then she would come back out to get him.

"I guess I'll be right back," she tells him, half excited and half anxious for reasons she couldn't exactly put a finger on.

Hopper lets out a deep breath once her car door closes.

This is it; he's home.

*El...*

He smiles and tries to stifle his nerves as he waits for Joyce to reappear.

Finally, the front door opens, and just like that, everything's changed.

Joyce steps outside to the edge of the porch and instantly, the look on her face tells him something's not right.

No.

Something's *really* not right.

Hopper climbs out of the car.

"Joyce?" There's a tremble in his voice, he can't even hide anymore.  
"What's wrong?"

She stands motionless on the little covered front porch, a piece of

paper clutched in her hand that's fallen to her side.

Hopper runs over to her.

“Joyce?”

His hands grasp her shoulders a little harder than he intends to, but thankfully he does, because she collapses forward into his arms.

A single, heart-wrenching sob escapes her mouth.

*This was really never going to end.*